

# Conservation SHOWCASE



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## Forestland Thrives in the Wake of Wildfire

*by Jennifer Cole, Washington State Public Affairs*

Summertime can be pretty dangerous for landowners and residents in Central and Eastern Washington. Summer is wildfire season. Just one spark from dry lightening, a stray cigarette, or a smoldering campfire can ignite acres of land, causing catastrophic losses of both property and lives. It's an especially dangerous time for forestland owners, who can have their entire livelihood turn to dust and ash within a matter of minutes.

That is one of the reasons Lorne "Bud" Dunning came to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service for forest stand improvements in 2010.

Dunning owns 480 acres of forestland just north of Ellensburg, WA. The forest has been overstocked for several decades and has been impacted with western spruce budworm in recent years. This created a tinderbox of fuel and the risk of wildfire was a major concern to the family.

Since then, Dunning has enrolled in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program. Taking advantage of financial incentives from NRCS, Dunning treated 240 acres of their property with forest stand improvements, thinning, and slash treatments - targeting areas that were in the greatest risk of wildfire and property borders.

Above: Landowner Lorne "Bud" Dunning consulting with an NRCS forester, Stan Janowicz, on improvements to his forest stand.





Left: **Dunning property after pruning, chipping, and pre-commercial thinning.** Right: **After the fire, there was greater survival of forestland due to the fuel-reduction practices put into place with the help of NRCS.**

They also created a fuels reduction zone surrounding the landowner's 50-year-old, hand-built cabin.

Then, on August 2, 2014 the Snag Canyon Fire started approximately one mile from the Dunning property. The fire ravaged the Sun East development just down slope from the property and destroyed 22 structures, including 10 homes. Within days the fire quickly grew to 12,600 acres.

NRCS received early reports from fire crews that the fire was being held back from the Dunning's cabin but approximately half of their property had burned. Because of the improvements NRCS helped Dunning make to his forest stand, fire crews were able to defend the fire within the property area. The fire quickly transformed from a much more dangerous crown fire just outside the perimeter, to a ground fire within the perimeter. Other sections of the property were so well thinned that they were safe for firefighters to utilize for back burning operations.

NRCS and partners were able to access the property a few weeks after the fire started to assess the damage. Some areas were seriously burned, but in general, NRCS helped create the conditions for a well-managed under burn and ground fire. The family's cabin was well protected and the conditions for a new, healthy forest to thrive were created.

"When you think of forest fires, you don't usually think of success stories. But I would say that the Dunning property is the perfect example of a 'win' for forest stand improvement," said Erin Kreutz, NRCS Resource Conservationist in Ellensburg. "The Dunning property not only survived the Snag Canyon Fire, but their forestland is now healthy and thriving in spite of it."

To learn more about forest stand improvements and how NRCS can help you with your forestland, contact your local USDA service center. Or go to [www.nrcs.usda.gov/Getstarted](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Getstarted).